

From Vision to Institution: Two Centuries of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Your Excellencies, Presidents and Dignitaries of sister academies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen—

The history of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences goes back to the early 19th century, known as the **Reform Age** in Hungary—a time when enlightened nobles, scholars, and patriots sought to transform a near feudal society into a modern nation. Roads, bridges, schools, and theaters rose beside new ideas about liberty, education, and economy. One driving force of these reform ideas was **István Széchenyi**, one of the wealthiest noblemen in the country, as well as a decorated officer in the Austrian army during the Napoleonic Wars.

Moved by the noble example of his father, **Ferenc Széchényi**, whose donations helped found the National Museum and the National Library, István Széchenyi made his historic commitment to donate one full year's income from his estates for the establishment of a learned society devoted to the cultivation of the Hungarian language as well as sciences. This pivotal event took place on November 3, 1825, at the national diet of Pozsony (Bratislava, Slovakia, today), and was immediately followed by similar pledges of three other young noblemen, friends of Széchenyi: György Károlyi, György Andrassy, and Ábrahám Vay. These four are remembered today as the founders of our Academy. Theirs was a practical act of generosity, as well as a symbolic act of faith: that the elevation of the nation must begin with the elevation of the mind.

“The true puissance of a nation lies in the multitude of scientifically instructed minds,” Széchenyi once said.

Széchenyi's bridges of mind and stone

Stepping back a few years, István Széchenyi traveled to England several times from the 1810s, not as a tourist but as a student of civilization, bringing home more than admiration: he brought a blueprint for modernization.

Two of his greatest projects—the founding of the **Hungarian Academy** and the building of the **Chain Bridge** across the Danube—were conceived as parallel acts of nation-building. One was to connect minds, the other to connect riverbanks. Together they symbolized—as well as performed—Hungary's passage into the modern age.

Today the two are inseparably present in historical consciousness as the most glorious memorials to Széchenyi. The Chain Bridge, designed by the English engineer **William Tierney Clark** and completed in 1849, united Buda and Pest physically and symbolically, laying the grounds for the unification of the three cities – Buda, Pest, and Óbuda [Old Buda] – to be realized in 1873, making the capital a modern metropolis.

Yet the person to first cross this architectural marvel in November 1849, was the very man who crushed Hungary's freedom fight: Field Marshal Julius Jacob Haynau, who only six weeks

earlier had ordered the execution of thirteen Hungarian military leaders, twelve generals and one colonel, as well as the Prime Minister, Lajos Batthyány, using the most humiliating methods.

The Academy's work was suspended, its property confiscated, its members watched by the Austrian secret police—but the community of scholars refused to vanish.

The Academy's survival during those dark years proved something vital: that once a nation recognizes its intellect, it finds ways to persist.

A Palace for the Mind

Then in 1860, a request for national contribution was launched to build a permanent home worthy of its growing collections and ambitions.

Designed by **Friedrich August Stüler**, the **Academy Palace** stood complete by 1865—a dignified Renaissance-style building overlooking the Danube, its façade both austere and graceful. On December 11 of that year, the palace was inaugurated in the presence of Emperor Franz Joseph and the leading figures of Hungarian science, art, and politics.

The building was more than a home for scholars—it was a declaration that knowledge itself was part of the nation's architecture.

Its **grand entrance** sends the promise of higher realms to all who desire elevation into the heights of the intellect.

The **Great Hall**, where we gather today, serves a gallery of historical and allegorical images towering over the learned audiences. Around us the painted figures of some of the most prominent members, watching over the living heirs of their thought, while the ceiling frescoes, created by **Károly Lotz**, celebrate the union of art and science.

To select just two of the many rooms, the **Small Session Room** preserves the intimate scale of deliberation.

And the **Reading Room**, with its tall windows and steady northern light, remains what it has always been: a home for inaugural lectures, where generations of scholars have demonstrated that their thoughts and discoveries deserved their getting elected.

Within these walls, the Academy's life began anew. The **Library**, founded upon the precious collections of Sámuel Teleki, grew steadily through the 19th century into one of Central Europe's great scholarly collections.

The century turns: trials and transformations

By the turn of the 20th century, the Hungarian Academy was no longer just a society of learned men discussing language and history—it had grown into a comprehensive institution that embraced the full spectrum of science and scholarship.

The turn of the century was filled with optimism and a sense of progress; yet the outbreak of World War I shattered this confidence.

The war's end brought not only the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Hungary's loss of two-thirds of its territories, but also years of chaos. The short-lived **Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919** attempted to remake society by decree. The Academy was drawn into suspicion—some of its members interrogated and arrested, its work halted.

During the mid-war years, the Academy drew strength from the life and thought of **Albert Szent-Györgyi**, who isolated vitamin C, winning the 1937 Nobel-prize for it, to become one of Hungary's most celebrated scientists. His words still resonate today:

“Research is to see what everybody else has seen and think what nobody has thought.”

He never lost his humor either, once quipping,

“A vitamin is a substance which makes you ill, especially if you do not take it.”

On a more serious note, he reminded the world that

“The real scientist is ready to bear privation and, if need be, starvation, rather than let anyone dictate to him which direction his work must take.”

These words became a quiet creed of integrity during the dark decades following the Communist takeover, when intellectual freedom was again constrained.

After Communism: the Academy transformed

Then, in 1989, the great political transformation came. Hungary reclaimed democracy, and with it the Academy reclaimed its sovereignty over research and the production of knowledge.

The presidents, each in their own time, guided the Academy through a transformation—scientific, structural, and digital. Their philosophies may differ, but they share a conviction that unites them: science and scholarship are not luxuries—they are the oxygen of a nation.

Under the leadership of **Domokos Kosáry**, a historian who had himself been imprisoned under the Communist regime, the Academy reasserted its role as a self-governing institution devoted to free science. His successor, **Ferenc Glatz**, opened its doors to public debate, restoring the Academy's voice in national life.

Over the next decades, presidents **Szilveszter Vizi**, **József Pálincás**, **László Lovász**, and **Tamás Freund** led the Academy through new kinds of transformation—technological, institutional, and spiritual. They fostered international collaboration, and brought scientific dialogue into the digital age.

Membership and the fellowship of scholars and scientists

Since its founding in 1825, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has grown from a small learned society of forty-five men into a national institution of 365 elected members.

In addition to the 365 full and corresponding members, making up the core of the Academy, we have external and honorary members too, as well as two affiliated bodies. The Széchenyi Academy of Literature and Arts, founded in 1992 as an autonomous affiliate, brings together leading Hungarian writers, artists, architects, and composers, with 88 members total. The Young Academy, established in 2019 with an inaugural membership of 24 young scientists, now reaches its full complement of 60 members and serves as the institutional voice of early-career researchers in Hungary.

Today, the Academy's fellowship represents the highest recognition of scientific and scholarly excellence in Hungary, chosen through a rigorous, independent election process.

Women were long excluded from formal participation, yet many carried out very significant research, reaching remarkably crucial results.

Female scholars and scientists began to enter the Academy only in the late 1940s. Although the first female members were elected more for their political loyalty to the ruling Communists than their scholarly output, those who followed were increasingly invited for their accomplishments. Since then, the number of women has grown steadily, though still modestly compared to men: today, thirty-seven women hold membership, which is still a little over ten percent only.

The evolution of the scientific sections

Since its founding, the Academy's scientific sections multiplied with the expanding frontiers of knowledge. As one historian put it, "Knowledge branched like a river, seeking every field where it could bring life."

Today, it encompasses eleven sections, spanning

- linguistics, literature, musicology, and ethnography;
- history, philosophy, archeology, and psychology;
- mathematics;
- agricultural sciences;
- medicine;
- engineering and technical sciences;
- chemistry;
- biology;
- economics and law,
- earth sciences, and
- physics.

Each section elects its own officers and plays a vital role in evaluating research, nominating members, and advising national science policy.

The fate of the Research Network

The research network of the Hungarian Academy was established after World War II to create a coherent institutional framework for Hungarian scientific research.

For nearly seventy years, these institutes formed the living laboratory of the Academy, ensuring the unity of research, scholarly evaluation, and national service. In 2019, however, the network was transferred to a new body, the **Eötvös Loránd Research Network (ELKH)**, severing it from the Academy's direct supervision. While the Academy retained its role as the guardian of scientific values, its institutions were now integrated and overseen by a bureaucratic center renamed as the Hungarian Research Network in 2023.

While the science institutes are still part of this network, among them,

Natural and Life Sciences Institutes

Institute / Centre	Founded	ELKH/HUN-REN Affiliation (since 2019/2023)
Institute for Psychology	1958	Joined HUN-REN Research Centre for Natural Sciences
Alfréd Rényi Institute of Mathematics	1950	Became HUN-REN Alfréd Rényi Institute of Mathematics
Central Research Institute for Physics (KFKI)	1950	Became HUN-REN Wigner Research Centre for Physics
Research Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences	2012	Became HUN-REN Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences
Biological Research Centre (Szeged)	1973	Became HUN-REN Biological Research Centre, Szeged
Institute of Experimental Medicine (KOKI)	1950	Became HUN-REN Institute of Experimental Medicine
Institute of Agricultural Sciences (Martonvásár)	1949	Became HUN-REN Agricultural Research Centre, Martonvásár

several key humanities and social science research institutes came to be attached to **Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE)** earlier this year, marking yet another stage in the separation of a network once under the direct supervision of the Academy.

Humanities and Social Sciences Institutes

Institute / Centre	Founded	ELKH/HUN-REN Affiliation (2019/2023)
Research Institute for Linguistics	1949	Transferred to ELTE (2025)
Institute of History	1949	Transferred to ELTE (2025)
Institute for Literary Studies	1956	Transferred to ELTE (2025)
Institute for Musicology	1969	Transferred to ELTE (2025)
Institute of Philosophy	1957	Transferred to ELTE (2025)
Institute of Sociology	1963	Transferred to ELTE (2025)
Institute of Economics	1963	Transferred to ELTE (2025)
Institute of Political Science	1977	Transferred to ELTE (2025)
Centre for Regional Studies	1984	Transferred to ELTE (2025)

In the international bloodstream

Through the Academy, Hungary entered the international republic of knowledge. Our scientists and scholars began to correspond and collaborate across Europe—proving that intellect is the most reliable form of diplomacy. From this exchange grew a lineage of Hungarian talent that would enrich the world far beyond our borders, as demonstrated by our Nobel-prize laureates in science. Among them,

Albert Szent-Györgyi, physiology-medicine (1937)
György Hevesy, chemistry (1943)
György Békésy, physiology-medicine (Georg von Békésy, 1961)
Jenő Wigner, physics (Eugene Paul Wigner, 1963)
Dénes Gábor, physics (Dennis Gabor, 1971)
János Harsányi, economics (John Harsanyi, 1994)
György Oláh, chemistry (George Andrew Olah, 1994)
Ferenc Hersko, chemistry (Avram Hershko, 2004),
and the last two:
Katalin Karikó, physiology-medicine (2023)
Ferenc Krausz, physics (2023).

They may have worked abroad, but they carried with them the habits of thought, as well as the devotion and daring first nurtured in their intellectual home—to which, we must add, several of them returned.

Conclusion: Two hundred years of light

In conclusion, we come back to the person with whom we began: **István Széchenyi**. He could not have known how far the light he kindled would shine, or through what storms it would endure. Yet he trusted in one timeless principle that knowledge, once shared, does not diminish: it multiplies.

He wrote:

“From one lamp another may be lighted, without the first being dimmed.”

That is the story of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in a nutshell. From language reform to brain research, from the first dictionaries to artificial intelligence, the flame has changed color but not essence. It is the same light that glowed in Széchenyi’s faith, in Eötvös’s precision, in Karikó’s messenger RNA vaccines, and in Krausz’s infrared molecular fingerprinting method.

Two hundred years have passed since Széchenyi’s noble gesture. During that time, the world around us has changed beyond measure, yet the calling remains the same: to nurture wisdom, to safeguard truth, to let knowledge serve the freedom and dignity of humankind. Empires have risen and fallen, yet the Academy has endured — not as a relic of the past, but as a living testament to the conviction that the mind, once set free, can renew a nation.

And so, as we look to the centuries ahead, may we hold fast to the same faith that once moved Széchenyi to action:

“Let us not seek gold or dominion, but the wealth of the mind, which alone endures.”

Thank you.